



“Final Words”
Scripture – John 14:15-21
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, May 21, 2017

San Antonio is a great city. I discovered this last week while attending a conference. However, the flight home Friday night was miserable. My stomach was churning and my teeth were clenched, and this was *before* we hit a nasty patch of turbulent weather. Why was I feeling so uneasy? One thought kept surfacing: What in the world am I going to do for a sermon on Sunday?

During the long plane ride back, I kept trying to calm myself with breathing exercises and prayer. You should try this the next time you fly. It makes the people sitting near you very nervous!

When the man across the aisle saw me open my eyes he leaned over and said, “Do you know something the rest of us should know?” I smiled and told him not to worry; this was just my personal angst.

The pressure was bearing down – as it should have been – as I kept asking myself: What will I do about a sermon? Two options appeared. Option #1: When I get home, pull out an old one and hope that you don’t notice it is a rerun. There was just one hitch. The bulletin had already been printed and the scripture passage was there in black and white. Option #2: You’re going to love this. And, it must have been God’s Spirit that planted this thought in my mind. Ready? You are going to help me create the sermon. Isn’t that just the best?

Here’s what I need you to do. Imagine that you are old...okay, for some this does not require too much imagination! Just kidding. None of you are there yet! I want everyone, Millennials and Gen Xers included, to imagine you’re at the end of your life. You have lived a long full life, but now your days are numbered and your family and/or friends have gathered.

Here’s where I need your help. What will you say to them? What will be your final words?

Raise your hand if you’re going to tell someone or everyone who is gathered, that you love them. All right, most are going to say, “I love you.” What ELSE will you say?

You might have a life lesson to share – a kernel of advice you’d like to pass on. You might wish to share a regret. You might have words of encouragement. I am not digging for one right answer or one shining pearl of wisdom that will knock the socks off everyone. I simply want each of us to think for a moment about some words we would like to share.

You have a whopping 30 seconds to think about this and then I will ask you to share with someone sitting near you. Ready? The clock is ticking! *(For those reading this sermon, take a few minutes to write down what you would like to say.)*

I do not carry around a lot of guilt, but I need to say to some people: forgive me for the times I should have had more patience with you. Forgive me for not being a better listener, and for not giving you the time you needed. Also, I would say to those gathered: Never stop growing. God wants us to always be in the process of becoming more like Jesus. Something I might say to my grandchildren is: Loving someone is so much more satisfying than winning an argument. I would also say: Never give up because you have no idea what surprises God has in mind.

Please don't wait until it's too late to share your thoughts with the people who need to hear them.

In today's scripture reading, Jesus is sharing his final words with his disciples. The Gospel of John spends much more time than the other gospels, focused on the Last Supper. In John, we are gathered in the upper room overhearing the final words of Jesus for five full chapters – nearly one-fourth of his gospel.

John, more than the other gospel writers, highlights the fact that Jesus knew his final words would be crucial. Jesus knew he had to prepare his disciples for what was coming because their purpose for living and their hope for the future was about to be crucified.

What would happen then? They feared being abandoned. Jesus said, "I will not leave you orphaned."

They must have protested, "If you are gone, we will be very much alone. We will be without our guide and strength."

Jesus replies, "I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate to be with you forever." Jesus calls God's Spirit "the Advocate," and says that he will be present with them through God's Spirit. He continues: "On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."

How will we, the followers of Jesus, be confident that he is in us? Jesus says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments...and I will reveal myself to you."

John speaks of God's Spirit more than the other gospels, but he is not fixated on mystical experiences. He is focused on concrete action.

At the beginning of the meal, Jesus removed his outer robe, poured water into a basin, knelt down on his knees, and washed the feet of his disciples. When he finished, he rose and said, "This is an example. Go and do likewise."

A few minutes later, he said, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you."

Otis Moss III is one of the premier preachers in the country. He earned his undergraduate degree from Morehouse College, his Master of Divinity at Yale Divinity School, and his doctorate from Chicago Theological Seminary. He is a marvelous speaker and the author of several books. But, when he was in the second grade, he was told he had a learning disability. He and the others who were identified as unlikely to be able to keep up with their peers were put in a special room – in the basement of the school – next to the boiler. I cannot say whether or not it was intentional, but everyone in this class was an African American.

They stuck some poor teacher down there with them. I'm guessing she got herself on the wrong side of the principal to draw that tour of duty.

It was her job to work with these young children who had been identified as having learning disabilities. She was to work with these children who had been branded with a huge label when they were just little kids.

The children were taken out of their classrooms and taken down to the room by the boiler. And, when they were all in their seats, the teacher said, “I want your full attention. Not one of you belongs here. You got that? And not one of you is going to stay here. It’s my job to get you out of here and where you belong – upstairs.”¹

I think that woman knew Jesus.

What was the name Jesus used for God’s Spirit? The Advocate. What does an advocate do? An advocate supports you. An advocate speaks up for you. An advocate stands up for you. An advocate is your defender and champion.

Jesus called on his followers to be steadfast in our devotion to him by doing what he did – healing, speaking up, defending, liberating and loving. And when we do, God’s Spirit dwells with us and in us.

In what ways is God’s Spirit at work in you? Do not wait until your final words to tell someone.

NOTES

1. Otis Moss III speaking at the Festival of Homiletics in San Antonio, Texas, May 17, 2017.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God, who set the planets in motion and stretched out the heavens like a curtain; who imagined parakeets adorned in emerald and prancing antelopes and purple-robed irises – *You* are Lord of all time and all creation. We marvel at the work of your hands and rejoice that enjoying such masterpieces was not enough for you. How is it that you – the Maker of Heaven and Earth – should long to dwell among us, as near as our breath, as constant as our beating hearts? How is it that you should choose to be God *with* and *for* us?

We give thanks that you do not leave us orphaned, but abide with us every hour, every moment. By your Spirit you surround us with peace and teach us your truth; you plant the seeds of hope, and inspire faithfulness; you intercede with sighs too deep for words. So we pray with confidence, trusting that you lean close to hear the petitions we voice, and that the Advocate fills the silence when words fail us.

We lift before you the concerns of our hearts, and pray for those who are ill, or lonely, or grieving; those who struggle with addiction, those who suffer from poverty in all its forms, those who endure the threat of violence. We lift before you our deepest longings and our quiet worries, and every unspoken prayer that silence draws from our hearts ...

Holy God – our Comfort and our Guide – Give us grace to sense your presence among us, and open our hearts to the whisperings of your Spirit. You have sent the Advocate so that we might believe your truth, follow your way, and practice your love. Work in and through us, we pray, that we might embody your teachings; and fashion us into a people that bears witness to Christ through word and deed, praise and prayer, sacrifice and service.

It is in Christ’s name that we pray, and that we offer the words he taught us: **Our Father ...**